

## Flagging Spirits

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In the February 2010 Look Back! column, Ross Eckler renews his wife Faith's request from the August 1981 Kickshaws for an answer to a riddle from a 1831 British publication. He notes that a year's subscription to Word Ways was offered for the solution, but that it went unclaimed. Apropos of nothing, one wonders whether that means that the offer is still open.

To refresh your memories, the riddle was:

In the morn when I rise, / I open my eyes, / Tho' I ne'er sleep a wink all night;  
If I wake e'er so soon, / I still lie till noon, / And pay no regard to the light.

I have loss, I have gain, / I have pleasure, and pain; / And am punished with many a stripe;  
To diminish my woe, / I burn friend and foe, / And my evenings I end with a pipe.

I travel abroad. / And ne'er miss my road, / Unless I am met by a stranger;  
If you come in my way, Which you very well may, / You will always be subject to danger.

I am chaste, I am young, / I am lusty, and strong, / And my habits oft change in a day;  
To court I ne'er go, / Am no lady nor beau, / Yet as frail and fantastic as they.

I live a short time, / I die in my prime, / Lamented by all who possess me;  
If I add any more, / To what's said before / I'm afraid you will easily guess me.

Ross suggests that the answer is "fame" (in its sense of notoriety); I feel this is answer is impossibly modern to be the answer to an 1831 riddle. The problem only gets worse when one looks in *Dickson's Balloon Almanac* for 1801 (published in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, presumably in late 1800). Pages are not numbered; the following is from the page after the October calendar:

### A RIDDLE

IN the morn, when I rise, I open my eyes,  
Though I sleep not a wink in the night:  
If I wake e'er so soon, I still lie till noon,  
And I pay no regard to the light.

I am chaste, I am young, I am lusty and strong,  
And my habit oft change in a day:  
To Court I ne'er go, am no Lady or Beau;  
Yet as frail and fantastic as they.

I travel abroad, and ne'er miss the road,  
Unless I am met by a Stranger:  
If you come in my way, as you very well may,  
You will always be subject to danger.

I have loss, I have gain, I have pleasure and pain,  
And am punish'd with many a stripe:  
To diminish my woe, I burn Friend and Foe,  
And the ev'ning I close with a pipe.

I live but short time, and die in my prime,  
Neglected by all who possess me:  
If I say any more, to what 's gone before,  
I fear you will easily guess me.

No answer is given, but I think that given this context, a good answer can be guessed.

Note that there are two significant differences between the 1801 and the 1831 texts (apart from the reordering of stanzas, which strikes me as not relevant to a solution): the 1801 version has "habit" in the singular, which has a quite different meaning from the "habits" of 1831; and most significantly, in the final stanza, the 1801 text has "Neglected" where the 1831 text has "Lamented."

I think the answer to the riddle is the Stars and Stripes. In the morning, the flag is raised (it rises), though it has not slept all night. It lies still atop the flagpole until the afternoon breeze picks it up. It is young (independence was declared only 25 years earlier), the country it represents is "lusty and strong." Its habit (in the sense of appearance) changes with every new State's admission to the Union. The flag does not go to Court (in the sense of King George's Court at St James), it's certainly not a lady or beau, and being made of cloth, it is frail. It is fantastic (in the 19th-century sense) both for the unseen ideal of Liberty that it represents, and in the sense that it represents foolish and foppish citizens who are going to be neglecting it in the final stanza.

The Flag travels abroad (on every United States' ship and embassy). The only way it can miss its road (lose its way, not represent Liberty) is if it is met by a stranger who doesn't know what it stands for. If you get in the way of the United States you are subject to danger (our swagger has been part of the American character since our founding, even when we were 15 small colonies and our enemy was the largest empire the world has ever seen). The United States has loss and gain, pleasure and pain. The flag is "punished" with many a stripe (15 of them at the time). The flag "burn[s] friend and foe" both in the sense that it inspires strong feelings (OED burn (verb) 12a), and in the sense that both are injured in battle. The flag closes its evening "with a pipe" (the flag is usually lowered to some music, presumably from a pipe in the 1800s. I have not been able to find a reference for this).

The final stanza, and the point of the whole riddle, I believe, shifts to how people are taking the flag, the country it represents, and the liberty it gives its citizens, for granted. The country will live but a short time, dying while it is in the prime of life (late 20s, early 30s), because it is being neglected by those frail and fantastic citizens of stanza 2.